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Weaknesses to mention in a job interview

Engineering Manager @ MicrosoftDisclaimer: this reflects my personal opinions, not those of my employer.Over the last few years, I have interviewed hundreds of candidates for positions in Software Engineering, Software Engineering Management, Product and Product Marketing Management, Technology Evangelism, and others. It has always bothered me how many people accidentally sabotage themselves, making entirely avoidable mistakes in the early stages of interviews and phone screens, preventing interviewers from getting to know those candidates better, forcing the premature end of the process for them.I call these mistakes avoidable because not making them is entirely under the interviewee's control, having nothing to do with aptitude, competence, interviewer having a bad day, or not being fit for a certain position. If you can avoid them (and you can!), then you are already standing out from the crowd, for being able to make your "elevator pitch" in a way that assures interviewers that you'll be able to handle yourself in a loop with their peers and managers.Without further ado, this is how you can do better in your job interview:A short introduction is a short introduction!Not an invitation for you to read through your resume. So when asked by the interviewer to give "a quick introduction so we can get started", do just that. Time it to 90 seconds or less. This is about who you are, not (yet) about what you have done. Let's mock it:Interviewer: "My name is X, I have been at this company for 5 years, doing X, Y, Z, and prior to this I spent most of my career doing mobile development, now I'm managing this team and am the hiring manager for this position."You: "My name is Y, I started in 19xx, when I was born, then went to school, where I learned how to read (...) then I had the opportunity to learn Docker, which I think is the future with Kubernetes, AI, and the Blockchain."WRONG. This is what you have done, not who you are.You: "My name is Y, I'm an Engineer/Marketer/Product person. I've graduated from X, been in this market for 5 years, most recently at company Y, and I love being at the intersection of product and engineering, and that's why I applied for the position".Speaking of timeDon't talk too much, or for too long. If you have been talking for 5-6 minutes without pause, your interviewer is probably already distracted and unable to piece your story together to a coherent whole. Keep answers short and to the point, make pauses, ask if the interviewer has questions, continuously check back to see if the person is still with you. If not, it's probably time to stop talking.A couple of extra tips here: if the company interviewing you requires that people take notes about your answers, you can pay attention to when the interviewer has stopped typing. It probably means you are adding nothing to your answer, so change gears. A second cue is that, for video interviews (or live, like in the good ole days), if the person you're talking to has gone static, not reacting to anything you said, that's a good sign that you should stop talking.What's your motivation?"Why did you apply for this position?" is considered by many the easiest question in an interview. Well, I have news for you: it isn't.There are many ways to answer this question in a way that will immediately raise suspicion in a good interviewer that you don't know what position you're applying for, which may be a terminal mistake in a selection process.Here are some bad answers:"Because company X is a great company!" - Yes, it is, but it also might have thousands of job openings, so you're essentially saying you'd happy to have any of those jobs."Technology is a great sector to be in right now" - A variation on the previous point, it tells nothing about your interest in this position."Because it's not very hands-on, from the job description" - Even if the position is not hands-on (and those are becoming rare in all sectors), describing your motivation on a negative/lacking/glad-I-don't-have-to-do-that way sends a bad sign that you are not interested in how things are built, only in the results.Some good ones:"Because the job description says that I would be doing high-impact work with healthcare partners, including leading ones, and that's something I'm passionate about""I am very passionate about mobile development in Swift and also UX, and looking at your company's products, I see that you have great care for your user experience, and I've been looking for a position where I can excel in both!"In short, read the job description, figure out 2-3 things you like, talk about them. If you can't, it's better not to apply.It's not about teamwork (at least not now)As a sports person, I am huge fan of two particular coaches: Bill Belichick, of the New England Patriots, and Bernardo Rezende, formerly of the Brazilian National Volleyball team. You probably know the former, but the latter is also a phenomenal coach: he won medals with both the Men's and Women's teams in six straight Olympics, from 1996 to 2016. Twenty years at the absolute top.What do they have in common? For both, it's all about the power of the team. Neither is shy to discard a star player who's not a team player. It's always about the team. I believe (after many mistakes) that I learned to be a team player in my career, and that is a good thing to be.Not in interviews, though.Interviews are all about you. How you are, what your motivations are, what you're good at, and what you have achieved in the past. When discussing an opportunity with you, a hiring manager wants to understand what your individual achievements are. Instead of talking about what "we" did, talk about what you did. Of course, you were working with a team of people but focus on what your individual contributions were.Instead of "we designed a high-performance distributed system for 5 billion users", say "I designed the component X that was integrated in a high-performance distributed system for 5 billion users". Then you can discuss your exact scope, which makes the interview crisp and focused. If you're a product manager, talk about your individual impact, be that on new ideas, increments, or improvements.A special case here: If a marketer, don't start you answer with "I briefed the agency on the campaign idea...". If you are just relaying an idea from the creative department to an agency for implementation, have you really done anything? If you originated the idea, say so. If not, think about your concrete impact and (extremely important) how results were measured.There will be opportunities to talk about your teamwork credentials, but until that time comes, let people know who you are and what you have done.Answer the question that was askedThis is a tricky one. There might be a language barrier, or you may be nervous, or you might not have heard it correctly. When you are asked a question, take a few seconds to understand it before you start talking. There are plenty of mistakes that can be made here, but the most common, in my opinion, is giving a hypothetical answer to a question that asks for a concrete example.More often than not, you are being asked to give a specific example that the interviewer would like to drill down in follow-up questions. Many people reply to any question with a generic example that makes following-up impossible, at least without asking extra questions, which will consume time from your opportunity to shine.For example, if asked "Can you tell me about a time when you had to handle conflict in your team?", a surprisingly common answer is: "When conflict happens, I try to analyze the root cause, I will sit down with both parties, and identify why this had to be escalated, find ways to de-escalate the situation, solve it using data, not opinions, and pay attention to prevent it in the future".This is a fantastic answer!Except it didn't answer the question.The question was "tell me about a time when you had to handle conflict". Something that has already happened, in the past, not a hypothetical situation.Similarly, if you are asked a hypothetical question: "How would you design a system for X", you want to start with a blank sheet. You might have designed a similar system in the past, and that is a good advantage for you, but the question is how you'd do it knowing what you know now. For example: "I designed a system for X in my previous job. I understood the requirements, made some estimations, chose options A, B, C, then made a design for it, experimented and iterated, etc."Again, a good answer that does not answer the question. A much better answer is: "I would begin by understanding the requirements, making some estimations, and typically in this scenario most teams would choose option A, but I have some experience with this type of system so I think B is the best choice, because its performance is 80% of A but it only costs 50%". That is a great answer that shows you can build on a foundation when seeing a new problem in the future. That's experience.ConclusionInterviews are tough. A high pressure situation where you are nervous, your interviewer may be nervous, and your knowledge and skills will be judged in a very short time, with a small set of questions. By following these tips, I hope you can make the best use of this short time to convey your best and be successful. Although there's a lot in interviews that is not under your control (and it's a good thing to accept that), avoiding simple mistakes is.Good luck!Previously published at Hacker Noon Create your free account to unlock your custom reading experience. No matter how prepared you are for a job interview, there's one question that everyone dreads. You know what I'm talking about — because seriously: How do you answer "What's your greatest weakness?" It's a query that comes up without fail, but as much as it might make you cringe inside, it's one you really want to ace. And as Melissa Dahl explains over at Science of Us, it turns out that honesty might just be the best policy here — even when you think it isn't.No matter what job you're interviewing for, a variation of this question is likely to come up. It might be when your prospective boss asks you about a time that you've "failed" at a task, or when they ask you to describe a scenario where your best laid plans have gone awry. The core of these questions are the same: They're asking you to admit a flaw or weak area that you very well may bring into their workplace.Of course, the standard advice for this question is to turn your "flaw" into a strength — basically playing with your words and phrasing to turn your "mistake" or "failure" into a positive attribute, either showing how you came through the rough situation and are now stronger, or addressing skills or coping mechanisms that you might have developed since then. You might even be tempted to take something that's actually a positive attribute and frame it as a negative — something like "being a perfectionist." This tack is pretty standard interview advice; indeed, I've been hearing it repeatedly myself since high school, and I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one.According to recent research, however, it appears that the best response to give to the question of your own weaknesses is an honest and accurate one. For example, in a 2015 study conducted by the Harvard Business School, researchers found that when undergraduates "humblebragged" about their weaknesses, they were less likely to be seen in a favorable light by their interviewers. Less than a quarter of the participants answered with actual negative qualities, such as procrastination — but these participants were seen as more hireable by about 30 percent.Of course, this sort of honesty does go against a lot of what we've been taught by career coaches and guidance counselors for years: Aren't we expected to turn out weaknesses into strengths? Who wants to give an employer a reason not to hire them? But as it turns out, being able to correctly identify weaknesses in yourself is something employers look for.As workplace expert Lynn Taylor at Psychology Today explains, showing that you are self-aware enough to know the areas in which you can improve shows that you are a mature worker, and not being overly self-critical shows that you are confident and graceful in awkward situations. She advises job candidates to be honest, but not to self-sabotage; admitted a flaw doesn't mean you need to ramble excessively or give detailed, overly specific examples of your failures.At the end of the day, it's important to remember that no one is perfect. In fact, the person interviewing you knows that neither you nor anyone else is not perfect — and indeed, honesty and self-awareness can be refreshing in a world where so many people feel pressure to look absolutely flawless all of the time.Of course, balance is key here: While you can be honest about a weakness or failure, you don't want to beat yourself up or appear self-deprecating in an interview. This is exactly the sort of answer you'll want to practice before an interview, so you can ace your body language, tone, and delivery. While sometimes it can be stressful, it looks like interviewing is just another place where honesty is the best policy.Images: Fotolia; Giphy (2)

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